

[HOME](#) [BLOG](#) [ARTICLES](#) [CONTRIBUTORS](#)[ABOUT](#) | [SUBSCRIBE](#)RELATED
TOPICS[Apologetics](#)
[Scripture](#)

Dripping Like A Leaky Faucet

ARTICLE BY [SCOTT OLIPHINT](#) SEPTEMBER 2012

A question has come from a reader in Austria concerning the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and the relationship of that guidance to the Reformed doctrine of Sola Scriptura (1).

This question is a good and relevant one, and it is one that seems to be more and more common these days. The issue itself is complex, but it relates to (at least) two aspects of a Reformed view of Scripture that should be highlighted. It has deep theological and apologetic implications.

We can begin to respond to this question by looking at the Westminster Confession of Faith, in Chapter 1, section 6:

The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men. Nevertheless, we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word.... [Texts given in support are "[2 Tim. 3:15-17](#)", [Gal. 1:8-9](#), [2 Thess. 2:2](#), [John 6:45](#), [1 Cor 2:9-12](#).]

The paragraph from the Confession, above, is describing what we call the sufficiency of Scripture. Sufficiency, we could say, is a subcategory of our Sola Scriptura doctrine. If Scripture alone is our foundation, then entailed in that "alone-ness" is that Scripture alone is sufficient for the church, since the time of Christ, through the ages. As the Confession states, Scripture's sufficiency pertains to "the whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and life." In other words, we have all that we need in Scripture so that we can give glory to God in all that we believe ("faith") and in all that we do ("life").

In confessing this sufficiency, however, we need to be clear that it applies to what God has spoken. In other words, to put it negatively, what we are not saying is that Scripture is all that is needed for salvation, faith and life.

ARTICLES

Dripping Like A Leaky Faucet
Article by [Scott Oliphint](#)
SEPTEMBER 2012

Just Disconnect
Article by [Carl Trueman](#)
SEPTEMBER 2012

7 Reasons Why Reformed and
Presbyterian Churches Should
Send Missionaries to Poland
Article by [Dariusz Brycko](#)
SEPTEMBER 2012

REVIEWS

[A Woman's Wisdom
Loving the Way Jesus
Loves](#)
[The Best of The Reformed
Journal](#)
[Charles Hodge: The Pride
of Princeton](#)
[The Hunger Games](#)
[Weight of a Flame: The
Passion of Olympia Morata](#)
[J.V. Fesko, Galatians](#)
[The Gospel Focus of
Charles Spurgeon](#)
[The Explicit Gospel](#)
[John Piper, Bloodlines](#)

COUNTERPOINTS

What John the Baptist Teaches
us About the Gospel
Preaching through John's
gospel, I have paused to
meditate upon the person
and work of John the Baptist.
Here was one who came as a
"witness, to bear witness
about the Light" ([In 1:6](#)).
Consistently (1:7, 14, 20) we
are told that the Baptist was
not the Light but a witness to
the Light.
by [Matthew Holst](#)

Doubting on Your Part Does Not
Constitute a Crisis of Faith on
Mine
One of the amusing things I
have noticed in the last

We need the work of Christ completed; we need the ministry of the Holy Spirit to unite us to Christ and apply salvation to us; we need exposure to that Word, to the church, etc.

But the sufficiency of Scripture, as a species of Sola Scriptura, affirms that God has said all that he needs to say in order for the church to bring him glory in all things, until Christ comes again (at which time there will, indeed, be new revelation!). As the hymn writer put it, "What more can he say than to you he has said?"

This is the point, in part, of [Hebrews 1:1-2](#). In redemptive history, the Lord spoke to our fathers by the prophets at various times and in various ways. But in these last days -- which includes "the days" that we are now in, until Christ returns -- he has spoken to us by his Son. Once God speaks by his Son, the culmination of the salvation of his people accompanies the culmination of his speech to the church. Christ has spoken, he has accomplished his task, and now he sits at the right hand of the majesty on high, while a footstool is being built for him, a footstool consisting of his enemies, which themselves are being subdued by and for him.

The other aspect, or species, of Sola Scriptura, that needs to be highlighted here is Scripture's authority. I have said a good bit about that in previous articles, so I won't repeat that here. But we should recognize, and emphasize, that the authority of God speaking can and must only be attached to what he has said in his Word. It is illegitimate, therefore, not to mention dangerous and deceptive, for anyone to say that the word of God has come to him as an individual. If that is so, then that word would carry all the authority of God himself, and would, by definition, undermine, subvert and contravene any biblical notion of the sufficiency and authority of Scripture. Any minister, for example, who stands up before his congregation and says "Thus saith the Lord," and then goes on to speak words not contained in God's Holy Word is not only running roughshod over Scripture as God's Word to the church, but, practically speaking, is leading his congregation astray and is, explicitly, moving them away from Scripture's authority to his own. This a minister of the gospel must never do. It is a religiously veiled form of presumed autonomy.

This is a good occasion (as we will do next month as well) to encourage readers to pick up and read John Murray. In his brief treatise, "The Guidance of the Holy Spirit," Murray outlines some of the problems, theologically and for the church, that are produced when Christians claim to have "a special word" from the Lord. I will quote him selectively and at some length.

Having affirmed that the Holy Spirit speaks alone by and with the Word, Murray notes:

... we may fall into the error of thinking that while the Holy Spirit does not provide us with special revelations in the form of words or visions or dreams, yet he may and does provide us with some direct feeling or impression or conviction which

twelve months or so has been a shift in the rhetoric used by members of the older generation (40 plus) surrounding what twenty- and thirty-somethings will believe. Five years...

by Carl Trueman

[More Counterpoints](#)

A R C H I V E S

[September 2012 \(5\)](#)
[August 2012 \(5\)](#)
[July 2012 \(6\)](#)
[June 2012 \(8\)](#)
[May 2012 \(5\)](#)
[April 2012 \(8\)](#)
[March 2012 \(7\)](#)
[February 2012 \(7\)](#)
[January 2012 \(7\)](#)
[December 2011 \(5\)](#)
[November 2011 \(5\)](#)
[October 2011 \(4\)](#)
[September 2011 \(4\)](#)
[August 2011 \(1\)](#)
[July 2011 \(3\)](#)
[June 2011 \(3\)](#)
[May 2011 \(4\)](#)
[April 2011 \(6\)](#)
[March 2011 \(6\)](#)
[February 2011 \(4\)](#)
[January 2011 \(4\)](#)
[December 2010 \(8\)](#)
[November 2010 \(4\)](#)
[October 2010 \(2\)](#)
[September 2010 \(4\)](#)
[August 2010 \(2\)](#)
[July 2010 \(1\)](#)
[June 2010 \(5\)](#)
[May 2010 \(4\)](#)
[April 2010 \(5\)](#)
[March 2010 \(6\)](#)
[February 2010 \(1\)](#)
[January 2010 \(4\)](#)
[December 2009 \(6\)](#)
[November 2009 \(6\)](#)
[October 2009 \(4\)](#)
[September 2009 \(2\)](#)
[August 2009 \(5\)](#)
[July 2009 \(7\)](#)
[June 2009 \(10\)](#)
[May 2009 \(5\)](#)
[April 2009 \(1\)](#)
[March 2009 \(6\)](#)
[February 2009 \(5\)](#)
[January 2009 \(3\)](#)
[December 2008 \(8\)](#)
[November 2008 \(6\)](#)
[October 2008 \(10\)](#)
[September 2008 \(4\)](#)
[August 2008 \(6\)](#)
[July 2008 \(6\)](#)
[June 2008 \(8\)](#)
[May 2008 \(7\)](#)

we are to regard as the Holy Spirit's intimation to us of what his mind and will is in a particular situation. ...[W]e are, in such an event, conceiving of the Holy Spirit as giving us some special and direct communication, be it in the form of feeling, impression, or conviction, a communication or intimation or direction that is not mediated to us through those means which God has ordained for our direction and guidance. In the final analysis this construction or conception of the Holy Spirit's guidance is in the same category as that which holds to direct and special revelation, and that for the reason that it makes little difference whether the intimation is in the form of impression or feeling or conviction or in the form of a verbal communication, if we believe that the experience which we have is a direct and special intimation to us of what the will of God is. The essential point is that we regard the Holy Spirit as giving us guidance by some direct mode of operation and intimation. We are abstracting the operation of the Spirit, in respect of guidance, from the various factors which may properly be regarded as the means through which we are to be guided. Particularly, we abstract the operation of the Spirit from the infallible and sufficient rule of practice with which he has provided us.(2)

Maybe some practical examples will help illustrate our points. When I was in my late teens, there was nothing -- trust me, nothing -- in my life that would have reflected anything but rank paganism. The reason for that was because I was a rank pagan. At one point in my life, I specifically remember the time, I decided that I would go buy a Bible. No one told me to do that; there was no "still, small voice" that said that I should do such a thing. I skipped school, so as not to be caught by my classmates entering the local religious book store, walked into the bookstore and asked for the cheapest Bible they had. A dear, elderly woman led me over to a paperback King James Bible, which I purchased for \$4.95 (plus applicable taxes, of course). I took that Bible home, hid it well, and began to read it whenever I had the opportunity. A few months later I heard, for the first time in my memory, the good news of the gospel. Everything that I heard brought to light all that I had been reading. I was a Christian.

Was it the Lord speaking to me to tell me to go buy that Bible so that, when I finally heard the gospel, I would recognize what he accomplished in me? No. It was God's gracious providence, working through that same Spirit, to bring me to himself. I don't need to say "the Lord told me," in part, because he didn't, but more importantly because I recognized that what the Lord was actually telling me was in that Bible that I had purchased.

So what is going on in situations like this? Again, Murray is helpful:

The function of the Holy Spirit...is that of illumination as to what the will of the Lord is, and of imparting to us the willingness and strength to do that will. It needs to be

April 2008 (11)
March 2008 (4)
February 2008 (1)
January 2008 (1 1)
December 2007 (3)
October 2007 (3)
September 2007 (5)
August 2007 (6)
July 2007 (5)
June 2007 (5)
May 2007 (4)
April 2007 (7)
March 2007 (6)
February 2007 (6)
January 2007 (8)
December 2006 (7)
November 2006 (7)
October 2006 (9)
September 2006 (8)
August 2006 (4)
July 2006 (9)
June 2006 (14)
May 2006 (8)
April 2006 (9)
March 2006 (2)
February 2006 (7)
January 2006 (4)
December 2005 (7)
November 2005 (6)
October 2005 (5)
September 2005 (6)
August 2005 (7)
July 2005 (6)

recognized that, as we are the subjects of this illumination and are responsive to it, and as the Holy Spirit is operative in us to the doing of God's will, we shall have feelings, impressions, convictions, urges, inhibitions, impulses burdens, resolutions. Illumination and direction by the Spirit through the Word of God will focus themselves in our consciousness in these ways. ...We must not think, therefore, that a strong, or overwhelming feeling or impression or conviction, which we may not be able at a particular time to explain to ourselves or others, is necessarily irrational or fanatically mystical. Since we are human and finite and not always able to view all the factors or considerations in their relations to one another, the sum total of these factors and considerations bearing upon a particular situation may focus themselves in our consciousness in what we may describe as a strong feeling or impression.(3)

The Holy Spirit, in his gracious providence to apply the depth and richness of our union with Christ to his people, works by way of illumination, not by supposed new revelations.

I recently spoke with a young woman in a foreign country about her conversion to Christ from Hinduism. She began her testimony by telling me that she awoke one morning with a strong and unmistakable conviction of her own utter sinfulness, and she knew something had to be done about it. She said that the Lord spoke to her in a dream. She then went on to explain that, when she told her parents about it, they encouraged her to be a better Hindu. It was clear to her, after a time, that this was doing nothing for her sin problem. Her parents then encouraged her to pursue Islam, which she did for a time, but to no avail. One evening, she went with a friend to a general gathering of other friends, and "happened" to meet there a Christian missionary who explained the gospel to her. She knew at that point that she had found what she had been looking for since that dreadful morning.

This dream that she had could be nothing other than the Spirit's illuminating work, bringing to light what she knew all along -- that she was a sinner before a holy God (see [Rom. 1:32](#)) -- and that same Spirit who worked in her brought her to that Christian missionary. The Spirit's ministry is to glorify Christ ([John 16:14](#)), and one of the ways he does that is by convicting the world of sin and righteousness and judgment (John 16:8-11). The Spirit of God moves wherever he wills, and he moves specifically to those whom the Father has chosen, and for whom the Son died, and he convicts them of their sin and unworthiness before his face, and of the judgment that will come unless that sin is covered, and God's wrath removed.

One more example, this time to illustrate the negative implications of thinking that God is giving us new revelations. A pastor told me of a woman who came to his study to announce to him that the Lord told her that she must divorce her husband. What is a pastor supposed to say in such circumstances? It was clear that there were no biblical reasons for

such a divorce. What must be said, as gently and pastorally as can be said, is that whomever is thought to be "speaking" in such circumstances, it is not the Lord. This kind of "revelation" can wreak havoc on Christians and churches alike.

Imagine this - we speak to someone who is outside of Christ and we affirm to them the absolute authority of the Word of God. They are convicted by the Spirit of God, and we begin to study that Word together. We then bring this new convert to a church, and the minister stands up and announces, "Thus saith the Lord to me, it is incumbent on all who are here to give to this church 50% of their income each month." (I wish this was a far-fetched and made up example, but it is not.) What will you say to your new convert friend?

Or what about this one? Your friend is trying to figure out if he should marry the woman he's dating. He goes to see his pastor. The pastor says that he has prayed about the situation and the Lord told him that your friend must marry that woman. What do you say?

Once the sufficiency of Scripture is challenged in this way, no matter how well-meaning the challenge, then there is no consistent way to hold to the absolute authority and sufficiency of Scripture. In such circumstances, Scripture's status is little different from its status in the Roman Catholic church - there is the authority of Scripture, and there is the authority of (insert person with "word of knowledge" here). As in Catholicism, this drips like a leaky faucet on Scripture's sufficiency and authority until it is eventually worn completely away.

Perhaps the best way to conclude this brief article is with a salient quote from John Owen (reading the entire volume would reap great rewards on this topic):

Since the finishing of the canon of the Scripture, the church is not under that conduct as to stand in need of such new extraordinary revelations It doth, indeed, live upon the internal gracious operations of the Spirit, enabling us to understand, believe, and obey the perfect, complete revelation of the will of God already made; but new revelations it hath neither need nor use of; -- and to suppose them, or a necessity of them, not only overthrows the perfection of the Scripture, but also leaveth us uncertain whether we know all that is to be believed in order unto salvation, or our whole duty, or when we may do so; for it would be our duty to live all our days in expectation of new revelations, wherewith neither peace, assurance, nor consolation is consistent. (4)

Dr. K. Scott Oliphint is professor of systematic theology and apologetics at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. His most recent book is God With Us: Divine Condescension and the Attributes of God.

Notes:

1. The most helpful study on the question of the Holy Spirit and his gifts is Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., *Perspectives on Pentecost* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1979).
2. John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray*, ed. Murray 1977, 4 vols. (1977), 1.187.
3. *Ibid.*, 1.188.
4. John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, ed. W. H. Gould, Ages Digital Library CD ed., 16 vols. (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), 4.80-81.

Recent Articles

- Dripping Like A Leaky Faucet
- Just Disconnect
- 7 Reasons Why Reformed and Presbyterian Churches Should Send Missionaries to Poland
- Vatican Files no.14
- The Two Kingdoms Doctrine: What's The Fuss All About? Part One
- Transcendental Meditation
- Much Better Than The Daily Mail
- Vatican Files no.13
- Why Easter Makes Me a Sabbatarian
- Is Sandusky Really Such a Bad Guy After All?

Recent Reviews

- A Woman's Wisdom
- Loving the Way Jesus Loves
- The Best of The Reformed Journal
- Charles Hodge: The Pride of Princeton
- The Hunger Games
- Weight of a Flame: The Passion of Olympia Morata
- J.V. Fesko, Galatians
- The Gospel Focus of Charles Spurgeon
- The Explicit Gospel
- John Piper, Bloodlines

Recent Blog Posts

- Preaching Matters
- Get Connected
- The wonder of Children's story bibles
- A hymn for when life is not terrific
- You cannot be yourself by yourself and preaching Romans
- Doodling in the Sand
- The king enthroned
- Why going bald might actually be a good thing
- More Quotable P.T. F.
- Review: "Matthew Henry: His Life and Influence"



We exist to call the Church, amidst a dying culture, to repent of its worldliness, to recover and confess the truth of God's Word as did the reformers, and to see that truth embodied in doctrine, worship, and life.

- [What Is the Alliance?](#)
- [How to Support](#)
- [How to Contact](#)

Featured Resource



Practical Christian Living CDs